



Grandparents *Raising* Grandchildren

In Michigan, 143,000 children live in grandparent-headed households. Here's a look at the challenges these grandparents face and the help that's available for them.

By Martha Nolan McKenzie

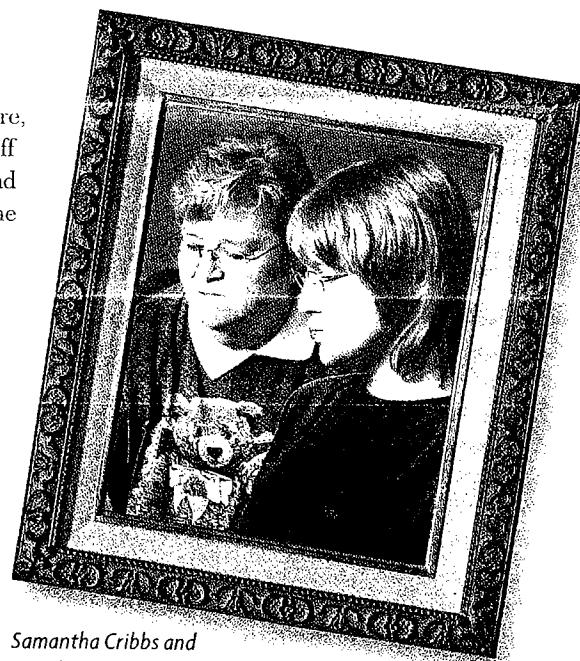
Ramona Knight and grandson, Lajuan Bramlett.

Michelle Barnes was ready to take it easy. She and her ex-husband had raised their four children and fostered 13 more, one of whom they adopted. She had just finished paying off the college loans she took out for her children, and she had moved into a little apartment with three cats. Although she was still working as a nurse educator in an Ann Arbor school district, she was looking forward to a relaxed retirement.

It didn't work out that way. Today, Barnes, 63, is back on the front lines of parenting, raising her six-year-old grandson, Terik. She has moved into a larger house and adopted two puppies. Instead of gardening or taking trips with friends, she spends her time dealing with earaches, homework and temper tantrums.

"I certainly never thought this is what I'd be doing at my age," says Barnes.

Her son, Terik's father, was in and out of jail when Terik was an infant. Terik's mother was unemployed and on drugs. When Terik was two, his mother got a job and began leaving him with inappropriate people, according to Barnes. "I took him whenever I could," she says. "Then one day I took him back home and his mother wasn't there. Instead, there were two drunk men in the living room, and they



Samantha Cribbs and granddaughter, Amanda Hines.

told me Terik's mother said I should leave the boy with them. I said 'no' and went to the court and got custody of him."

Barnes doesn't regret her decision. "Nobody made me take Terik in," says Barnes. "I'm doing it because I love him. I want him to grow into a whole person filled with grace, and I think I can help him do that."

Still, she finds her new role difficult. For one thing, Terik has emotional and behavioral problems that stem from his rough beginnings. And Barnes now finds herself cut off from her former peers. "I was the only one who appeared at my 40th high school reunion with a toddler," she says.

Though Barnes often feels as if she's alone, she is actually in very good company. Across the U.S., 4.5 million children — more than six percent of all children under 18 — live in households headed by a grandparent. In Michigan, 143,000 children live in grandparent-headed households. And this trend, which cuts across all socioeconomic, racial and ethnic boundaries, is growing.

"In the last decade, Michigan has seen a 25 percent increase in the number of grandparents who are raising their grandchildren," says Jim McGuire, director of planning and advocacy for the Area Agency on Aging 1-B in Southfield. "But our senior population has grown just five percent over the same period. So our population of grandparents raising grandchildren is growing five times faster than our older adult population."

The reasons behind this troubling trend are myriad. Incarceration, AIDS, mental disorders, poverty, teen pregnancy and, recently, military deployment leave many parents unable to care for their children, compelling grandparents to step in. But the biggest driving force, according to experts in the field, is substance abuse. "It really started in the '80s with the crack cocaine epidemic," says Virginia Boyce, the Grandparents as Parents (GAP) program coordinator for Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County in Ann Arbor. "You can't hold a family together when you're on crack cocaine."

However they came to this place, grandparents who find themselves in this role are pulled by strong and opposing forces. On one hand, these grandparents are motivated by love, and they reap the emotional and spiritual benefits of doing the right thing and of being supremely needed and useful. On the other, they must navigate a difficult and often confusing road blocked with legal, financial, housing and emotional issues.

Legal issues

Grandchildren often arrive in a grandparent's home abruptly, many times as the result of a crisis, and the arrangement is completely informal and believed to be short-term. However, as days stretch into weeks and weeks into months, grandparents are forced to confront the dilemma of their legal relationship with the grandchild. Should they try to obtain guardianship? Should they adopt the child? Amy Goyer, coordinator of the AARP Grandparent Information Center in Washington, D.C., says, "In most cases, without legal status, the grandparent cannot enroll a child in school, get medical treatment or obtain financial assistance."

However, many grandparents are reluctant to take steps toward formalizing their legal status. Fear of losing their two



Facilitator David Krajewski, CSW, leads a support group in Jackson on the importance of asking for help.

grandsons has kept Irene and Roger Gunnink of Three Rivers from pushing for legal guardianship, even though their lack of legal status has made it difficult to find child care and medical care for the boys. Though they think the boys' mother, their daughter, would consent, they fear her husband would retaliate.

"Our daughter is bipolar and has problems with drugs and alcohol," says Irene, 52. "Her husband has problems with drugs and alcohol. They cannot provide a good home for those boys. We've brought up the issue of guardianship, but we're afraid to push it because we're scared of what their father would do."

For grandparents who do pursue a degree of legal status, there are various options available:

- **POWER OF ATTORNEY.** A quick, easily obtained and inexpensive legal arrangement, a power of attorney gives grandparents specific rights to make decisions in the interest of the grandchild. A power of attorney lasts for six months, and the parent retains his parental rights.
- **LIMITED GUARDIANSHIP.** Parents and grandparents work together to craft a temporary legal arrangement for the child. With the parents' consent, the grandparent is entitled to assume parental rights during the specified time period.
- **FULL OR PERMANENT GUARDIANSHIP.** A grandparent can be awarded full guardianship if he or she has informally raised the grandchild for a period of time or if the parents can no longer care for the child. If the parent opposes guardianship, the grandparent must file a petition in court. As a legal guardian, the grandparent can act as the child's parent, although parental rights are not terminated, and the parents can go back to court to have the guardianship revoked.
- **CUSTODY.** Legal custody is like guardianship, but it has different rules. A grandparent can gain custody of their grandchild when the parents sign a contract consenting to the arrangement or a court gives the grandparent custody during a court hearing.

- **KINSHIP FOSTER CARE.** A child enters the foster care system when a court removes him from his parents' home as a result of abuse or neglect. The grandparent can apply to become a licensed foster care parent for the child. The good news is the grandparent will receive aid from the state — up to \$400 a month. The bad news is the court retains legal custody of the child and the grandparent is subject to a lot of oversight.

- **ADOPTION.** Adoption severs all of the parents' rights and responsibilities and bestows them on the grandparent. Before a grandparent can adopt her grandchild, the parents must have given their consent or a court must have terminated their parental rights. Grandparents do not need to go through an adoption agency or retain an adoption attorney. "There are rights and protections that adoption affords," says Elly Falit, recruitment specialist with the Adoption/GAP Collaboration program for Catholic Social Services in Ann Arbor. "The parents can't come back sometime in the future and get the child back. And the grandparent can decide who will care for the child if he or she dies. And after the grandparents' death, the child can receive SSI benefits."



Photo above: Ramona Knight (left) and Judy Flannery with Ms. Knight's grandchildren, Lajuan and Syndia Bramlett, attend a Grandparents and Other Relatives as Parents Program in Jackson.
Photo right: Bill Flannery with granddaughters, Amber and Kayla Flannery.

over age 65 or if any family member is blind or physically or mentally disabled.

Low-income grandparents can also get help with food costs through the Women, Infant & Children (WIC) program, which is administered through local health departments. They may qualify for food stamps through their county Family Independence Agency or the school lunch program through the Michigan Department of Education Food and Nutrition Program.

This assistance is a life boat for many. Dorothy Allen,

58, is raising four grandchildren, ages three to 14, on the \$1,300 she receives each month from Social Security, SSI and a family grant. Though cash is always tight, Allen has been able to keep her family together, thanks to these funds and other assistance. "I do get food stamps, but those kids can eat up a mountain, so sometimes I get food from the churches," says Allen, who lives in Detroit. "It's just working out by the good grace of God, but it's working out."

Medical insurance

About one-third of all children who live in grandparent-headed households do not have health insurance, according to the Children's Defense Fund. If the grandparent is still working, their employer's insurance generally will not cover a grandchild, unless that grandchild is adopted. Medicare won't cover a grandchild even if he is adopted. Private insurance for the children is out of reach for most. Most children in this situation qualify for coverage through a state-funded program, but grandparents are often told — mistakenly — that they must have legal custody or guardianship in order to apply.

Children living in low-income households may be eligible for Medicaid, even if the grandparent is not the legal guardian. In Michigan, the Medicaid program that covers children under age 19 is called Healthy Kids. Any child who is receiving a child-only grant, a family grant or SSI benefits is also eligible for Healthy Kids. If the child does not qualify for Healthy Kids, he or she may be eligible for coverage under MICHild, a health insurance program for uninsured children of low-income working families. If they qualify, the family pays a monthly premium of \$5, no

Financial issues

Taking on additional mouths to feed and bodies to clothe presents a financial challenge, particularly for grandparents who may be living on a fixed income.

One source of assistance is the federal cash benefit program, known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF. Grandparents and other relatives can apply for TANF benefits in one of two ways — a child-only grant or a family grant. Eligible children can continue to receive monthly assistance until they reach age 18. "Many grandparents could qualify for this money, but many don't know how or where to apply for it," says Brent Elrod, manager of policy and programs for Generations United in Washington, D.C. "It's not a huge amount of money — the amount varies from state to state — but for some it can make a real difference in keeping the family together."

A grandparent raising a grandchild may also be eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) if they are low income and

Are you a grandparent raising grandchildren? For more details on some of the programs offered by Michigan's Area Agencies on Aging, turn to pages 10-19 in this issue of Michigan Generations.

matter how many children they have. There are no co-pays or deductibles. Another program — Children's Special Health Care Services (CSHCS) — provides coverage and referrals to children with special needs.

Getting the coverage they need can be a challenge for many grandparents. Mary Freemire and her husband, Jerry, have been raising their five-year-old grandson, Bradley, since his birth. Bradley was born three months premature, which led to a host of medical conditions, including seizure disorder, sensory motor dysfunction and learning delays.

Mary, 56, was an adoption worker for the state, so she knew how to navigate the system and get the resources she needed. Even so, it took her a year and a half to get Bradley enrolled in Medicaid, CSHCS and on her private policy. "And I know what I'm doing," says Mary, who lives in Portage. "For a grandparent who doesn't really know the system, I don't know how they'd do it."

Housing issues

The house or apartment that was perfect for the empty-nester may suddenly become too small when a grandchild or two moves in. And space isn't the only problem. The grandparent may be living in a senior housing facility that does not allow children. Or they may be in public housing where rules limit the number of occupants.

In Boston, MA, two nonprofits developed GrandFamilies House, the nation's first housing program specially designed for grandparent-headed families. In Michigan, the Church of the Messiah Housing Development Corp., a Detroit nonprofit group, plans to emulate GrandFamilies House with its own Champlain Village. Though it is still trying to secure the \$9 million in funding needed, construction is slated to begin in September, with completion planned for next Spring.

Of a total of 40 town homes, 10 will be designated for grandparents raising developmentally disabled grandchildren. "We will have a clubhouse, two play spaces and a community resource center for older kids," says Fran Howze, executive director of the Church of the Messiah Housing Development Corp. "We're going to work with several community-based partners to offer extensive support services to the residents, including intergenerational recreational activities, computer classes, health education and group and individual counseling."

Emotional challenges

For all the legal, medical and financial issues faced by grandparents-turned-parents, the emotional issues can be the greatest — and the most conflicted. Undeniably, there are emotional rewards. "Over time, it can be a wonderful thing for grandpar-

ents," says GAP's Boyce. "It can add a lot of meaning to their lives. They know they are doing good, and there is a lot of satisfaction in that."

They also have to opportunity to forge special bonds with their grandchildren. Kathy Jones (not her real name) has been raising her 16-year-old grandson, Scott, since he was five. "I've got nine grandchildren, but I'm particularly close to Scottie," says Jones. "He was my first grandson, so we had a special relationship anyway. But since he's lived with me, we've gotten even closer. And he's very happy here with me."

On the flip side, however, some grandparents are plagued with guilt, feeling somehow responsible for their child's inability to parent. They have to give up their cherished role of grandparent and assume the more difficult one of parent. And many grandparents find that task of parenting more complicated by the condition of their grandchildren.

"The kids the grandparents get are often compromised," says Boyce. "They might be compromised before birth by drugs. They might be compromised again in infancy by neglect. By the time the grandparent gets the child, there are often serious issues."

Lynette Battle found herself raising her two grandsons in her small Detroit home after it became clear they were suffering from neglect, and perhaps even abuse, in the care of her daughter and a string of her boyfriends. The oldest

grandson, now seven, hated Battle, blaming her for the situation and lashing out with severe emotional and behavioral problems. The youngest, now four, cried constantly and scratched himself until he bled.

"I was dumbfounded," says Battle, 49. "I didn't understand how these little bitty kids could have all these problems, and I didn't know how to deal with them. All my friends have grown children, so they don't understand what I'm going through. For the longest time, the only outings we ever had were to doctors' appointments. I felt totally cut off."

Getting help

Help is available for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren, but far too few know about it. "One of the

biggest problems is misinformation or lack of access to information among grandparents," says AARP's Goyer. "For example, if their grandchild has special learning needs, they may be eligible for an IEP (Individualized Education Program), but most don't know about it because it wasn't around or wasn't needed when they were raising their own kids."

In Michigan, the State Office of Services to the Aging, local AARP chapters and local Area Agencies on Aging provide information, referral and resources for grandparents raising grand-

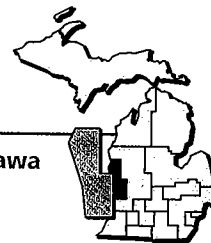
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Cherrie Druckenbrodt and granddaughter, Arica Druckenbrodt.

Senior Resources of West Michigan

Located on the shores of Lake Michigan, serving the three counties of Muskegon, Oceana and Ottawa



Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

At the age of 63, Ellen finds herself responsible for raising children. Ellen and her husband already raised their own four children, but now their grandchildren need their care or they will enter the foster care system. Ellen and her husband did not plan to raise a second generation of children at this time in their lives, but they will do the best they can.

Many grandparents providing care to their grandchildren find their personal resources stretched to the limit, coupled with lack of support from friends and others who cannot identify with what they are going through. Child and Family Services of Muskegon offers their Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Program to residents of

Muskegon, Oceana and Ottawa counties. Any grandparent who is providing care to their grandchild(ren) is welcome to call for community resource information, receive assistance with a problem or challenge, participate in an eight-week educational seminar or join a monthly support group.

Fourteen grandparents are currently enrolled in Child and Family Services' educational seminar for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. Five children are provided day care while the group is meeting. Group discussion may focus on sharing legal issues, learning com-



munity resources or providing encouragement to members. Participants may pose questions about how to handle grandchildren who seem resentful and are "lashing out." Possibly

more important are the laughter and good humor that are evident within the group; it's great to be involved.

For more information, call Nancy Weller at Child and Family Services, 231-726-3582.

Raising Grandchildren

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children. The Kinship Care Resource Center, sponsored by Michigan State University, has a toll-free hotline to answer legal, guardianship and other questions, as well as services for kinship families. For a list of resources, see "Where Grandparents Can Get Help," page 20.

Perhaps the most helpful resource available to any grandparent is a support group of other grandparents in the same situation. The meetings provide a brief respite from their parenting duties, understanding shoulders to cry on, lessons learned by others who have traveled the same road and a break from isolation. All around the state, support groups with names such as "Grandparents Raising Grandchildren," "Second Time Around" and "Grandparents as Parents" give grandparents a much-needed framework of support.

Second Time Around in Kalamazoo is typical of such groups. The foundation of

the group is an eight-week series of seminars, covering topics such as legal options, parenting skills, educational issues and stress management. "We meet for two and a half hours one evening each week and provide an evening meal and childcare for the grandchildren," says Joyce Stout, coordinator of the Second Time Around program for the Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service in Kalamazoo. "We try to give them a lot of good, useful information. They get so much help from each other, and they get a two-and-a-half-hour break from their grandchildren. Most of them tell me it's not long enough."

In addition, Second Time Around organizes three family events a year — a summer picnic, a holiday party and a floating event, which this year will be a trip to a local children's theater production. It also has occasional workshops on a variety of topics.

Second Time Around's most popular offering, however, is its monthly support group meetings, attended by grandparents who have graduated from the eight-week seminar. "We have two going on

right now, and the grandparents are devoted to them," says Stout.

Irene Gunnink of Three Rivers attends Stout's support group religiously. "I really look forward to our Wednesday night sessions," says Irene. "If I'm having a tough time, just knowing I'll get to meet with everyone keeps me going. It is so wonderful and empowering to be surrounded by people who understand exactly what you are going through and who really care about you. I can't say enough about how much it has helped me."

Those who work with grandparents would like to see society as a whole become more supportive of them. "Unfortunately, many institutions and agencies make it difficult for grandparents to get services and information they need for their grandchildren," says AAA1-B's McGuire. "But this is a large and growing segment within the community, and there needs to be a greater sensitivity to this issue. After all, many of these grandparents are stepping into terrible family situations and providing love, care and safety for these children. These grandparents are heroes." **MI**